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SUBJECT: UNHCR, ICRC STILL WATCHING FOR CROSS-BORDER FLIGHT  
FROM PAKISTAN TO AFGHANISTAN

REF: 08 KABUL 2361

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¶1. (SBU) Summary. The leadership of Kabul-based offices of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) shared an overview of their planning for potential movement of Pakistani refugees to Afghanistan with the Refugee Affairs Section. Both organizations believe it unlikely that a significant number of refugees would flee to Afghanistan, but they do have contingency plans to respond should new movements occur. In the meantime, Afghan refugees repatriating from Pakistan are reporting that insecurity was one factor in their decision to return after decades in exile, but the main factor was poor economic conditions in Pakistan.

UNHCR and ICRC on Flight from Pakistan: Watchful Waiting

¶2. (SBU) On May 10 UNHCR's Country Representative for Afghanistan, Ewen MacLeod, told RefCoord and a visiting Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (State/PRM) delegation that UNHCR is following the situation within Pakistan. In addition to the Pakistani military offensive in the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) districts of Lower Dir, Buner, and Swat, UNHCR is tracking the impact of sectarian violence in Hangu District, further south. Note: Insecurity in Hangu caused cross-border population movements in prior years. In 2008 a non-governmental organization (NGO) implementing a health program for PRM on behalf of camp-based refugees in Hangu withdrew its personnel from camps due to security concerns.

¶3. (SBU) UNHCR is not currently seeing significant numbers of Pakistanis moving from NWFP to Afghanistan. Rather, movements appear to be within NWFP, where internally displaced persons (IDPs) can find assistance through family, government, and/or humanitarian organizations. (See extensive reporting from Islamabad and Peshawar.) UNHCR is closely watching the border situation from its sub-office in Kunar Province. In autumn 2008 approximately 20,000 Pakistanis, and Afghans who had been living in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), sought refuge in Afghanistan from military operations in FATA, reftel. MacLeod said Kunar and Nangarhar residents were still sheltering 12,000-13,000 Pakistanis. They have not required external support beyond the shelter and winterization assistance provided when they first fled across the border. MacLeod also mentioned that the newly reinstated UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in Kabul is working off a pre-existing contingency plan for 50,000

persons and has been checking with partner UN agencies to ensure they have stocks to assist with a rapid influx from Pakistan.

14. (SBU) In a separate May 12 conversation, ICRC Head of Delegation Reto Stocker echoed UNHCR's comments and predicted most conflict-driven movements in Pakistan would be internal.

New IDP camps and delivery assistance points to assist those fleeing conflict have been set up and widely publicized. Should the situation change, the ICRC is prepared to draw from its regular operational stocks and could support up to 3,000 families (approximately 18,000 persons) in eastern Afghanistan. As in the past, the ICRC would rely upon its partner network of Afghanistan Red Crescent Society volunteers to deliver assistance in Kunar Province and would coordinate with the UN on dividing up geographic areas of response. Stocker noted that the ICRC's and UNHCR's Afghanistan and Pakistan delegations had all been sharing information cross-border for contingency planning.

Afghan Refugee Voluntary Repatriation Slow and Deliberate So Far

15. (SBU) UNHCR is also watching the impact of insecurity and IDP movements on the 1.7 million registered Afghan refugees in Pakistan. MacLeod estimated it would take two or three weeks to see if the counter-insurgency operations in Pakistan result in more rapid repatriation. UNHCR's records indicate 114,000 Afghan refugees live in the most affected districts of NWFP (Lower Dir, Buner, and Swabi). UNHCR sub-offices in Gardez and Jalalabad are prepared to accept a rapid influx of 50,000 returnees. Coordination on unusual movements is being done with ICRC in Kunar and with the UNHCR sub-office in Peshawar, where refugees present themselves at a voluntary

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repatriation center (VRC) prior to departing for Afghanistan.

16. (SBU) May 11 we visited the Kabul encashment center, where 135 Afghan families participated in voluntary, assisted repatriation. UNHCR confirmed that returnees - over 12,700 between April 5 and May 8 - were coming back with their personal belongings and families intact. They had not left in haste or involuntarily. Note: Refugees check out of Pakistan at VRCs, and check in to Afghanistan at encashment centers. Between March 1 and May 1, 2008, more than 67,000 Afghan refugees repatriated from Pakistan with UNHCR assistance. UNHCR's assisted repatriation operations this year did not begin until April, and those only through Peshawar, with operations through Quetta indefinitely suspended. It is too early to tell whether the decrease rate of returns is due to restricted operations or other factors.

17. (SBU) Several returnees at the Kabul encashment center spoke separately with Kabul Refugee Affairs Specialist. Most said poor economic conditions in Pakistan were the main factor in deciding to return. A few said they feared spreading insecurity could eventually reach them in Pakistan.

They chose to return sooner rather than later, reckoning that the international community would turn its attention to the humanitarian crisis in Pakistan and withdraw its support for Afghan returnees. In particular, they wanted to take advantage of the cash assistance provided to returnees (approximately \$100 per person) while they thought it would still be offered.

18. (SBU) Comment: Both UNHCR and ICRC, which regularly deal with internal and cross-border movements of people in insecure areas, appear well-prepared for a rapid cross-border movement should the situation in Pakistan worsen and drive flight into Afghanistan. Kabul Refugee Affairs' Section will maintain contact with UNHCR and ICRC on cross-border movements and periodically check with the Kabul and Jalalabad encashment centers in the coming weeks to track motivations for, and voluntariness of, Afghan refugee returns.

